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AN ABC INSCRIBED IN OLD ENGLISH RUNES

The bronze fragment herein described was purchased some years ago in Rome by my friend Professor Clifford H. Moore, who recently turned it over to me for examination and publication of the inscription. It shows the familiar *patina* that is acquired by ancient bronzes, and is a portion of the upper side and rim of what must have been an urn of large size. The left edge is broken roughly, while the right edge seems to have been evened up by cutting. The inscription is on the rim. The general style of the characters and many of their forms are such that at first glance, without detailed examination, one might easily follow the natural presumption that they belonged to some one of the ancient Italic alphabets. But they prove to be Old English runes arranged to represent the Latin alphabet from *a* to *z*, with the *w*-rune inserted between those for *g* and *h*.

Examples of the Latin alphabet done in Old English runes are numerous and well known from manuscripts in the libraries of England and various parts of the continent, as Paris, Munich, Vienna, St. Gall, etc.¹ These may be termed "runic ABC's," to distinguish them briefly from the "futhorcs" or regular runic alphabets in the futhorc order, like that inscribed on the Thames Knife and several of those in manuscripts. These manuscript alphabets, of both kinds, were "for the most part copied by men of an antiquarian turn of mind but wholly ignorant of what they were copying. In this way the forms have become perverted and their values confused."² There are some, however, which are reasonably faithful reproductions. Of the ABC's some represent the full Latin alphabet from *a* to *z*, some *a* to *y*, some *a* to *z* with omission of *y*, and some *a* to *z* with other runes added. A given Latin letter may be represented by two different runes, both of approximately

¹ Hickes, *Linguarum Vett. Septentrionalium Thesaurus*, Vol. III, Table II; Kemble, *On Anglo-Saxon Runes*, Plates XV, XVI, in *Archaeologia* XXVII; Stephens, *Old Northern Runic Monuments*, I, 104-14.

² Hempl, *Trans. Am. Phil. Ass.*, XXXII, 189. The promised special treatise on these manuscript alphabets has not yet appeared.

appropriate value, e.g., *d* by the *d*-rune or the *thorn*, *o* by the *othil* or the *os*. There are many more arbitrary variations, the confusion being greatest in the representation of Latin *q* and especially *x*, *y*, *z*.

Ours is the first epigraphical example of such a runic ABC. If we may judge from the plainer style of the characters, which one must not assume to be due merely to the difference in material, and from the relative accuracy in values, it is certainly of earlier date than the manuscript ABC's, with the possible exception of the few which are without the ornate forms and confused values that characterize the majority.

The following is a rough representation of the characters, with superscribed numbers for convenience of reference:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
ʃ	β	ʃ	⌘	ʃ	ʃ	+	ʃ	⌘	+	ʃ	ʃ	⌘	+	⌘	ʃ	ʃ	ʃ	ʃ	ʃ	ʃ	ʃ

Ten of these need no comment, being perfectly normal in form and value, namely:

Nos.	1	2	4	12	13	14	16	18	20	21
=Lat.	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>u</i>

No. 3 differs in the direction of the oblique stroke from the usual Old English *c*-rune. The same variant occurs in two of the important manuscript ABC's, the so-called Marcomannic runes (Kemble, figs. 1, 2; Stephens, nos. 17, 24), also on the smaller Nordendorf brooch and once on the Charnay brooch (Henning, *Deutsche Runen*, pp. 54, 107), and regularly in the shorter Scandinavian futhark. The same character is repeated, no. 11, answering to Lat. *k*, and again, no. 17, answering to Lat. *q*. The slight variation in no. 17 is hardly sufficient to be regarded as an intentional differentiation. In the manuscript ABC's Lat. *q* is represented sometimes by the same form as the *c*, sometimes by a reversed form of the same, sometimes by other runes having no relation in value to *q*; while Lat. *k* is often represented by the *kalk*, but also arbitrarily by various other runes.

No. 5 is not the *e*-rune, which regularly represents Lat. *e* in the manuscript ABC's, but the *aesc*, the old *a*-rune in its English value of *æ*.

No. 6 has the same form as no. 5, instead of the proper form of the *f*-rune with the oblique strokes turned upward. The error was probably induced by the form of the Lat. F.

No. 7 is +, for usual X = g.

Nor. 8 is the *w*-rune, inserted here in the same position which it occupies in the futhorc (no. 8, and between the *g*- and the *h*-rune).

No. 9 is virtually identical with no. 4. No such variant of the *h*-rune is quotable, and we must have here the one instance in this ABC of downright confusion with no apparent cause.

No. 10 is not the *i*-rune, but may be intended for the *j*-rune, which has the form + on the Thames Knife (but here only). Another possibility is that the writer was diverted into the futhorc order (*g, w, h, n*) from the point of agreement with the ABC in no. 7, and not only inserted the *w*-rune, but also continued with the *n*-rune as no. 10. For this has nearly the same form as no. 14, the regular *n*-rune.

No. 15 is the *othil*, the original *o*-rune, which in Old English (Northumbrian) came to be used for the mutated \bar{o} , that is $\bar{æ}$, while *o* and \bar{o} were represented by the new *os*. But the *othil* is used for *o* on an old coin (cf. Stephens, *Handbook*, p. 193, no. 74; Wimmer, *Runenschrift*, p. 87). In the manuscript ABC's Lat. *o* is also sometimes represented by the *othil*, but more commonly by the *os* (sometimes with the name *othil* attached). In an ABC of St. Gall (Kemble, fig. 5, Stephens, no. 21) both *othil* and *os* are given for Lat. *o*.

No. 19 is nearer to the form of the *s*-rune which appears on the Charnay brooch and elsewhere, namely \mathfrak{Z} , than to its usual Old English form \mathfrak{h} . But in any case the writer was influenced here by the Lat. Z.

No. 22 is the rune which in Norse inscriptions stands for the sound resulting from final *s*, namely *z*, later *r*, and commonly transcribed *R*. This *z*-rune was not used in English words, but kept its place in the alphabet, having the same position in that of the Thames Knife as in those of Vadstena and the Charnay brooch. In the manuscript futhorcs and ABC's it is given a variety of values and positions, but most commonly those of either *x* or *y*. In the Runic poem (Kemble, fig. 11) it is given the value of *x* and the name

eolhx. In one manuscript (Hickes, Table II, 5) it is placed under Lat. Y in the ABC arrangement, but is twice used for *x* in the subscribed runic transcription of *pax vobiscum pax*. In general it is the value of *x* which enjoys the better tradition, and it is plainly this value that is intended in our ABC.

That our ABC is based upon *Old English* runes is of course sufficiently clear from the specifically Old English no. 1; likewise from the value of no. 5 and the form of no. 16. To account for its being found in Italy there are various possibilities. (There is nothing to justify suspicion of a modern fraud, which is unsupported by anything in the appearance of the bronze and is virtually excluded by the internal evidence.) The fragment might have found its way into Italy through antiquarian hands in recent times, just as one side of the runic Franks Casket, which first came to light in France and of which the main part is now in the British Museum, came into the possession of the Museo Nazionale of Florence. But what seems to me distinctly the most probable view is that it is a piece of an old Roman or Etruscan urn, and that this piece (more probably than the urn intact) was found and decorated with the inscription by one of the countless English pilgrims who visited Rome in the period, from the seventh century on, of close relations between Rome and Anglo-Saxon England.¹

To describe one's personal adventures and false starts in the pursuit of the solution of a problem is usually neither illuminating nor in good taste. It may seem particularly superfluous in the case of a result so obvious as is the runic character of our inscription to anyone familiar with runic forms. But my experience may be worth the confession in connection with Professor Hempf's well-known views regarding the origin of the runes. My previous acquaintance with runic inscriptions, apart from transcriptions, had been too remote and casual to leave me with any vivid picture of the runic alphabet. Hence the identification, which a runic specialist would have made at a glance, was delayed until an

¹ "That unceasing stream of pilgrims—prelates and prince and humble sinner—which now from England and the farther isles as well as from all parts of Francia thronged the road to the threshold of the apostles," *Cambridge Mediaeval History*, II, 583. The sojourn of English pilgrims in Rome was a commonplace, and the English "schools" or stations for their entertainment are frequently mentioned in Bede and the Saxon Chronicle.

accident drew my attention to the form of a certain rune and put me on the right track. Before this I had been canvassing the early Italic alphabets—and quite naturally. For not merely had the inscribed fragment come from Italy; the general style of the characters and also the majority of the particular forms were identical with those to be found in one or another of these alphabets. Yet some of the forms could not be paralleled, and many of those that could be were not found together in the same alphabet. It was necessary to conclude that our inscription was not in any known variety of the Italic alphabets.

But in the process of elimination I could not fail to be impressed by certain remarkable points of agreement with the “North Etruscan” alphabets and that of the so-called “Old Sabellian” inscriptions (mostly from southern Picenum). Consequently, after my belated recognition of the runes, I reread with especial interest Hempl’s comments on the origin of the runes (*Sievers Festschrift*, pp. 12 ff., *Jour. Germ. Phil.*, II, 370 ff.). For it will be recalled that in criticizing the current theory of Latin origin he pointed out that Wimmer, in surveying the non-Latin Italic alphabets only to reject them as sources, had paid scant attention to the “Old Sabellian” and “North Etruscan,” in which were some significant points of agreement. Hempl’s own conclusion was that the runes were “based on a Western Greek alphabet differing but little from the Formello alphabet and that in the direction of certain other Western alphabets, for example the Venetic, the East Italic (or ‘Sabellic’), and the Gallic.” The fuller exposition of his views which was then promised has not yet appeared. Hempl’s criticism has been recognized as, at the least, a most serious blow to the prestige of Wimmer’s treatment, and there have been other scholars, before and since, who definitely rejected the whole theory of Latin origin. Yet this theory is still widely held (for example, the Swedish archaeologist Montelius in a lecture in Chicago some years ago stated it as not subject to doubt), perhaps, as Hempl remarked in 1898, “for the simple reason that no other has been so well presented or in any way established.”

My accidentally renewed interest in the question has led me to the conviction, which I express here for whatever it may be worth,

and however superfluous it may seem to those already convinced, that Hempl is on the right track, even though there are wide gaps in the evidence which will have to be at least partially filled before his theory can win general acceptance. And these gaps cannot be filled from the inscriptional material at present available. Even so, Wimmer's theory ought to be definitely abandoned as contrary to all reason. It is utterly incredible that the Latin alphabet of the first century A.D. should, merely from its use on wood, as Wimmer assumes (*Runenschrift*, p. 97), or from any other accident, have reverted to archaic forms identical in so large measure with forms current in the non-Latin Italic alphabets. The mere external identity of at least fourteen of the twenty-four Germanic runes with forms in these Italic alphabets, the question of values being left out of account, can hardly be accidental.¹ This is not to imply that the relation of values must not also be measurably cleared up before any positive theory of origin can be regarded as established. But there is always the possibility of new inscriptional material from northern Italy and beyond, which will disclose a variety of alphabet with more agreement in values than any now quotable. Hempl has, I think, made the acceptance of his theory more difficult by assuming an unnecessarily early date for the establishment of the runes, namely about 600 B.C. Many of the Italic alphabets seem to have retained their archaic type down to the time when they were replaced by the Latin, and I see no reason why the borrowing might not be set as late as the first century B.C., or perhaps even the first century A.D.

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¹ One of the most striking cases of formal identity which I had noticed in my comparison, and one which Hempl emphasized and interpreted as regards value, is that between our no. 4, the *d*-rune, and the character which occurs, in the value of a sibilant, in "Old Sabellian," Venetic, in some varieties of "North Etruscan," and rarely in Etruscan (cf. Pauli, *Altital. Forsch.*, III, 154 ff.).

Another case of formal agreement, which I had noted particularly because of the peculiar form, is that between our no. 16 (the English *p*-rune) and a character that occurs several times in the inscription of Bellante (Zvetaieff, *Inscr. Ital. Med. Dial.*, no. 1). But so long as the former is confined to England and the value of the latter is unknown (usually thought to be a sibilant, though it has also been taken as *v* or *b*), it will be futile to assert a real connection.

A notable case of identity in both form and value, one which Wimmer was aware of but declared accidental (*Runenschrift*, p. 99, footnote), is that between the Germanic *a*-rune (=Eng. *æ*-rune, our no. 5) and the *a*-character in several varieties of the "North Etruscan" alphabet (cf. table in Pauli, *Altital. Forsch.*, I, 57), for example in the bilingual of Todi and the "Lepontian" inscriptions from Ornavasso, west of Lago Maggiore.